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ABSTRACT

The different conceptual approaches to organizational culture used in the last decade are discussed to provide clarity for cultural researchers in higher education. Emphasis is on the differences between functional and interpretive perspectives of organizational culture. The underlying assumptions, rationales, and methodological implications are highlighted for each perspective. Recent studies of organizational culture are reviewed to provide an understanding of different conceptual approaches to culture. Organizational metaphors and the cultural view of organizations are discussed, and cultural analysis and organizational administration are explained. It is suggested that organizational behavior in general, and the functional school of organizational culture specifically, are driven largely by the desire for rules and management guidelines. The functionalist intends to highlight principles and concerns of culture so that managers may become more skilled in manipulating cultural variables. Cultural anthropologists and the interpretive schools do not want to be applied problem solvers. The interpretive perspective is more theoretical and less applied. The interpretive approach believes that managers influence organizational meaning and that an awareness of the enactment that occurs in an organization aids in effective management. Contains 35 references. (Author/SM)

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Two Paradigms of Organizational Culture

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Adam's Mark Hotel in St. Louis, Missouri, November 3-6, 1988. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Abstract

This article discusses the different conceptual approaches to organizational culture that have been utilized in the last decade. In particular, the article delineates the differences between functional and interpretive perspectives of organizational culture. The underlying assumptions, rationales, and methodological implications are highlighted for each perspective.

Over the past decade organizational theorists have begun to shift from more traditional theoretical paradigms (behavioral, structural, rational) and toward a variety of "cultural" approaches. Although still not widely prevalent in postsecondary research, the cultural paradigm parallels a shift in outlook that is also occurring in the social sciences and humanities. Although I am in general agreement with the change in perspective for studying higher education organizations, my purpose in this paper is to outline fundamental differences among the cultural approaches with which we currently investigate organizations. Black and Stephens have commented: "Most of those writing about organizational culture use the concept with little precision" (1988,p. 24). If we are not to muddle in conceptual confusion, then necessarily we ought to come to terms with the different theoretical suppositions that concern the nature of organizational culture.

I begin with an overview of recent studies of organizational culture to provide an understanding of different conceptual approaches to "culture." The differences between functional and interpretive perspectives of organizational culture receive attention. I then point out the epistemological assumptions, rationales, and methodological implications of each perspective. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the different views of culture for organizational researchers.

Organizational Metaphors and the Cultural View of Organizations

Morgan (1987) has observed that we create particular images of organizations that frame what we conceive to be an "organization." The most common metaphor of an organization is that of a machine with

multiple parts that function to achieve maximum efficiency. A second metaphor is that of an organization as an organism that adapts to its environment to survive. Other metaphors such as organizations as psychic prisons (Morgan 1987), organized anarchies (Cohen & March 1974), theaters (Goffman 1959; McLaren 1986), or texts that are read (Tierney 1988) have also been used.

Each of the metaphors provides ways to think of organizations. Metaphors frame our way of thinking so that we raise questions and discover answers we would not uncover if we drew upon another metaphor. For example, an organism that adapts to its environment will develop different decision-making strategies than will a machine that is relatively unconcerned with its environmental context. The view of an organization as anarchic posits different questions for the leader than does an organization where each part is mechanistically interrelated. The leader in an anarchic organization is unable to create change whereas the bureaucratic leader is a Weberian technocrat who is capable of keeping the machine running smoothly and efficiently.

Cultural analyses of organizations imply a radically different view of an organization than those of the previously mentioned metaphors. In the broadest sense, students from the cultural school view the organization as a shared system of beliefs where symbolic activities occur that have meaning for organizational participants. In general the normative social structure receives more attention than the behavioral structure, and the informal aspects of the organization receive equal, if not more, attention than the formal side of the organization.

Research is now being conducted on institutions, organizations, and subunits of organizations as distinct and separate cultures with unique sets of ceremonies, rites, and traditions (Pfeffer 1981; Trice & Beyer 1984). Initial attempts have been made to analyze leadership from a cultural perspective (Burns 1978; Bennis 1984; Tierney 1988). The use of culture as a tool for strategic planning has been a central aspect of the work of Chaffee (1984a, 1984b, 1985; Chaffee & Tierney 1988). The interrelationships between the organization and the environment have been discussed (Smircich & Stubbart 1985; Tierney 1987) as has the role of symbolic communication (March 1984; Gudykunst 1985).

Organizational stories and symbols also have been studied (Hirsch & Andrews 1983). Writers have suggested that an identifiable deep structure and set of core assumptions exist that may be used to examine and understand organizational culture (Schein 1983). Finally, Clark (1970, 1971, 1980) has written extensive work on the role of belief and loyalty in collegiate organizations and the use of organizational sagas as tools for institutional identity.

Clearly, cultural studies of organizations have burgeoned. However, little consistency exists with regard to how researchers have defined organizational culture. Writers who discuss organizational culture have widely varying rationales, assumptions, research strategies, and criteria for interpreting culture. Further, culture has not only been viewed as a new management approach that will cure a variety of organizational problems, but culture also serves to explain virtually every event that occurs within an organization. As a catch-all

phrase, organizational culture currently obscures our understanding of organizations as often as it provides insight.

By pointing out the confusion that exists in current studies of organizational culture, I do not imply criticism of researchers who have undertaken cultural studies. Conceptual confusion and lack of clarity occur whenever new theories or hypotheses arise; by definition, new paradigms are ill-defined. Indeed, if questions and confusion did not occur one may well ask if the theoretical proposition is new.

In addition, the concept of culture comes from anthropology. It would be foolhardy to assume that an anthropological consensus exists about the definition of culture. From E. B. Tylor in 1871 to the current work of Clifford Geertz, we have seen several different conceptualizations of culture's definition. Different definitions often contradict another definition's assumptions and propositions. As Geertz has noted, "Anthropology ... is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other" (1973,p. 29).

It is important that we differentiate the disparate concepts of culture so that we are clear about our premises and subsequent conclusions. Different problems call for different questions and methodologies. My intent is to aid in the "refinement of debate" about how we perceive culture in organizations. For the remainder of this article, I will contrast two ways of seeing culture in organizations--the functional and the interpretive. I have chosen the two definitions because they are the most frequent ways of discussing organizational

culture, and they also raise particular insights about why we perceive culture the way we do.

Underlying Assumptions

The different ways writers use the idea of culture relate directly to the epistemological foundations from which they begin their analysis. Researchers guide their inquiry by different assumptions and with different goals. If our view of organizational reality is in large part determined by the questions and assumptions with which we start, then the nature of the investigation, the methodology, and the research findings will vary accordingly. Thus, to understand the differences between functional and interpretive approaches to culture we consider the underlying assumptions, purposes, and manifestations of each perspective.

Functional approaches to culture. This perspective most closely parallels the metaphor of the organization as an organism; culture is the "glue" that hold the organism together. The assumption is that a normative, informal organizational structure exists that demands understanding and analysis. Culture is the result of the social enactment of the organization by the participants. As with other organizational components such as the social structure and the environment, culture exists as an interrelated variable in the organization. That is, culture influences components such as social structure, technology, and the environment, and those variables also influence organizational culture. As a variable, culture is manipulable and manageable by organizational participants.

Basic assumptions exist about the nature of organizational reality. The organization exists in a "real" world that is

comprehensible both to the participants and to the researchers trying to understand the organization. That is, the organizational world is comprised of objective, palpable structures that exist irrespective of human consciousness. In essence, the organizational world is understandable and finite. The organization equals the sum of its parts, and culture is one of those parts. As a variable in the organization, managers can utilize culture to increase effectiveness. When they act symbolically or orchestrate important ceremonies and rituals one deduces that they are calling upon the cultural dimensions of the organization.

Cultural dimensions derive from group experience and are learned behaviors. Consequently, one only finds culture where a definable group exists with a significant history. That is, if a researcher can document that an organization has a set of basic assumptions and beliefs and has shared a number of critical events over time, then we can say that the organization has a culture. Conversely, groups without a history or basic beliefs can be said to lack culture. Schein states this point succinctly: "The organization as a whole may be found to have an overall culture if that whole organization has a significant shared history, but we cannot assume the existence of such a culture ahead of time" (1985,p. 8). From this perspective a distinctive college with a history such as Reed or Swarthmore can be said to have a culture, whereas a new, urban commuter community college will probably lack culture.

Assumptions about culture, such as strong cultures are more effective than weak cultures (Deal & Kennedy 1982), or particular management practices are more effective than others (Peters & Waterman

1982), exemplify the belief that culture can be counted; culture equals objects, acts, and events. That is, organizational participants produce culture.

Whether or not a culture is strong or has subcultures is an empirical question that can be studied. It is also conceivable that within postsecondary institutions subcultures will be found such as faculty in disciplines or particular groupings of students. Weis (1985) has noted how black stude re developed at an institution in relation to the dominant ethos the organization, and Becher (1981) has commented on how an academic discipline may form a primary culture for a faculty member. Similarly, strong cultures can be unearthed by way of the institutional members' identification with basic norms and tenets. The challenge for the researcher is to assess the strength and vibrancy of the overall culture and of the subcultures.

The researcher uncovers culture by investigating how an organization expresses itself in its symbols, rites, stories, or similar cultural artifacts. Essentially nomethetic in nature, the methodological endeavor concerns uncovering the abstract and universal laws of the organization. That is, each cultural artifact has a particular function that, if operating effectively, strengthens the culture. Cultural artifacts are objects within the organization that have a particularly symbolic or "deep" meaning. In this sense, a symbol signifies more than a rationally-created message. For example, university ceremonies such as commencement or tenure review are rational actions that point out which individuals have completed

certain requirements and whether or not particular individuals deserve advancement and promotion.

From the culturally-functional perspective, commencement and tenure are also overt rituals that affirm overarching ideologies and socialize members into the organization. Symbols such as a visionary presidential address at an "All-College Day" or a president's presence on any number of local committees serve to highlight particular aspects of the university. A college or university's "saga" functions as a vehicle that gives purpose and meaning to the overall scheme of the organization.

Culture, defined as shared values and beliefs, has three key functions. First, culture provides organizational members with a sense of meaning and identity. Second, culture shapes behavior; participants act in one way and not another because of the parameters of the culture. Third, culture increases organizational stability and effectiveness.

Much literature has recently been written about the function of the leader in managing culture. Since culture exists in most organizations, and has an impact on organizational effectiveness, then it is imperative for the manager to understand culture. Culture affects decisions and outcomes primarily through the processes used to reach decisions. Outsiders who do not understand "how things are done around here" may have the best ideas, but will be unable to implement them because of cultural insensitivity. Similarly, strategies for innovation and change will be hampered if the organizational manager is unaware of which cultural levers to pull to effect change.

Insofar as culture exists as a causal variable that can make organizations more effective, and culture can be changed, functionalists assume leaders can strengthen culture by a variety of devices. For example, Peters and Waterman (1982) have offered "management by walking around" as a managerial tool that has an explicitly cultural function. In short, good cultural managers walk around their buildings and get to know their employees, bad managers remain sequestered in their offices. Further, good managers place a high degree of importance on oral communication, whereas bad managers communicate by way of impersonal memos. Good managers have an open door policy that symbolizes collegiality, poor managers exhibit little concern over subordinates feelings or opinions. Thus, the job of the cultural manager is to uncover ways to manipulate cultural artifacts to achieve organizational goals.

The purpose of studying culture parallels interest in other organizational theories. Culture is a key variable in effecting organizational change. As an applied science, researchers study cultural artifacts to determine what are effective and ineffective strategies in achieving organizational goals. The imperative for managers is to understand the artifacts of their own cultures so that they can then utilize each artifact symbolically in a manner consonant with the culture.

It is important to note that functionalists still view the organizational world in a manner similar to other mainstream organizational theorists; the organization is a comprehensible, rational, "real" entity. Just as managers have times when they ought to act symbolically, times exist when managers do not act symbolically.

Similarly, certain objects are imbued with cultural value and other objects are void of cultural worth. The goal for the manager is not only to comprehend the organization's culture, but also to understand the appropriate times to act culturally.

The assumptions from which the different theoretical conceptions of culture arise point out different methodological formulations for the way to study culture. Functionalists enter organizations with an explicit inventory of cultural artifacts to uncover. The researcher's method is based upon preconceived protocols and research designs that test hypotheses in a manner similar to positivist researchers. Again, the assumption from which the researcher works is that systematic investigation will uncover the culture of the organization. As with organizational structure, culture is seen as a distinct set of explicit variables such as rituals, symbols, stories, and myths. Taken together these variables create a composite of culture. The researcher sees the organizational world from a predetermined viewpoint.

For example, note how a functional researcher takes an informant through the history of the organization under study. The interviewer begins, "Let's go back over the history of your organization. ... Who was involved? (Try to locate the important founding figures or leaders.) What were the critical problems in getting started?" (Schein 1985,p. 119). The researcher focuses on critical issues, acts, and events. And those issues, acts, and events will be similar regardless of the organization to be studied. The emphasis on cognitive, functional facts gives the appearance that culture is explicit, that it is "highly visible and feelable" (Schein 1985,p. 24).

In sum, four basic assumptions exist about the nature of organizational reality. First, we assume that culture is cognitive and can be understood by participants and researchers. Second, we assume that a culture that functions effectively has manifest meaning; all participants interpret cultural artifacts similarly. Third, we assume that it is possible to codify abstract realities. Fourth, we assume that culture can be predictive and generalizable. In a functional world, the assumption is that objective events such as rituals or ceremonies are predictors of objective circumstances such as productivity, and subjective perceptions such as commitment and satisfaction (Sypher, Applegate, & Sypher 1985). Insofar as similar cultural artifacts exist from organization to organization, generalizability beyond the specific organizational setting is possible. From the theoretical assumptions the implications for managers and researchers become self-evident: managers are capable of effecting change if they are culturally sensitive, and researchers must look beyond structural formalities and toward symbolic behavior that nevertheless can be observed and understood.

Interpretive approaches to culture. Unlike the functional perspective, interpretive researchers are not in search of a precise definition of culture. Indeed, a central assumption of the interpretive approach is that organizational reality is far too abstruse for a precise definition. Instead, the interpretivist's aim is to bring us "in touch with the lives of strangers ... and in some extended sense of the term to converse with them" (Geertz 1973,p. 24). Hence, the assumptions upon which an interpretive perspective of organizational culture exist are four-fold and stand in sharp distinction to

functional assumptions. First, culture is not necessarily understandable either to organizational participants or researchers. Since culture is an act of interpretation, what one observes and interprets will vary. A second, related assumption is that organizational actions are mediated by equifinal processes. That is, the construction of meaning does not mean that all individuals interpret reality similarly. Third, it is impossible to codify abstract reality. Fourth, culture is interpretive, a constant process of negotiation between researcher and the researched.

In this light, organizations are subjective phenomena where participants create their reality. This approach begins with the assumption that the culture of an organization constitutes human existence to such an extent that either prediction or the ability to reduce organizational meaning to predetermined elements is impossible. Intentionality depends upon the culture's prior significations within which individuals constitute themselves. Rather than the functional view that assumes that reality is objective and external to the participants, the interpretive perspective assumes that reality is defined through a process of social interchange. Participants' reality is built and changes according to the congruence with the perceptions of others. Rather than functional and orgasmic, the model is based on Berger and Luckmann's concept of the social construction of reality (1967).

An interpretive perspective to culture has different foci than that of a functional perspective. Different questions and assumptions arise when one seeks to interpret culture, rather than find culture's functions. Culture is neither a variable that is predictive; nor is

it necessarily manageable. Instead, the interpretive notion is that all knowledge and meaning is rooted in the subjective views of the organizational participants. Rather than a causal model of culture, the interpretive perspective emphasizes "thick description" (Geertz 1973). Consequently, the interpretivist assumes more of an ideographic methodological stance than nomothetic. Contextually-specific interpretations are emphasized that provide the researcher with ways to come to terms with organizational phenomena. Thus, the focus is away from the general and universal and toward the specific and unique.

Whereas a functionalist views culture as a product of the organization, the interpretive perspective sees the organization as a culture. Instead of "glue" holding the organization together, culture is a root metaphor. Smircich comments:

> Culture as a root metaphor for organizations goes beyond the instrumental view of organizations derived from the machine metaphor and beyond the adaptive view derived from the machine metaphor. Culture as a root metaphor promotes a view of organizations as expressive forms, manifestations of human consciousness (1983,p. 347).

Rather than assume that all individuals interpret organizational activities similarly, the concept of equifinality takes on increased importance. "Equifinal meanings," note Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon, "are interpretations that are dissimilar but that have similar behavioral implications" (1986, p. 2). That is, participants agree on organizational goals to be taken but not necessarily on the reasons for taking the actions.

As with the functionalist, researchers still examine cultural components such as symbols, ceremonies, and rituals; the difference, however, is that these components are not viewed as generalizable

cultural artifacts that serve to produce culture across organizations, but rather as specific components of culture that help shape meaning.

For example, a functional analysis of a cultural artifact such as a presidential speech, assumes the significance of the speech and focuses on how the speech affects organizational effectiveness. On the other hand, an interpretive analysis does not assume any a priori significance to a particular artifact. Instead, the question asked will be what are the different ways in which people communicate? The goal at this stage will be to gain a sense of the range of social situations where reality is constructed. Meaning and significance derive from the contextual specifications of the organization under study.

If a researcher finds that a speech demands analysis then the researcher will provide a description of the speech that is rich in detail and thick in nuance. The content and meaning of a presidential speech will be described, as well as how such artifacts aid participants in making sense of the organization. The field worker struggles to ascertain the meaning of the event for the participants. Once an array of events has been analyzed, the data is compared, attempting to discern the basic norms that underlie specific patterns.

Since all of the organization exists in an interpretive web, then all of reality is constantly recreated. Manifest symbols such as major speeches may be culturally significant, yet it is the context in which the symbols reside that gives life to the symbols. Insofar as organizations consist of human interaction, and all interaction is interpretive, all organizational activity exists within an interpretive context.

Thus, culture neither exists in someone's head nor is culture the sum of symbolic objects that exists as markers of a culture. Culture is all of the significations that create meaning for the organizational participants. Such a definition demands that the researcher come to terms with how the participants view the organization and interpret reality rather than have the researcher provide epic analyses about the nature of reality.

All of the organizational universe is open to interpretation and as with anthropology, generalization is anathema. What is a culturally loaded symbol in one organization may have little or no meaning in another organization. What is a culturally-effective strategy for one manager may lead to disaster in another organization.

The purpose of interpretive studies is not to predict the consequences of a particular act because prediction is impossible. Because culture is not a causal model interpretive researchers must constantly protect themselves against accepting their own presuppositions of organizational problems, and study instead the problems of the people as those problems are organized in the institutional lives of the people with each other (McDermott & Hood 1982). One interprets culture; one seeks to understand the activities within the organization. The researcher's task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform the participants' acts and to construct a system of analysis that interprets those acts.

Participant observation, ethnography, and reliance on multiple qualitative strategies provide tools for understanding the research site from the natives' point of view. Rather than a functional analysis, readers receive a measure of vicarious experience where they

are provided with a holistic and lifelike description of organizational culture. Studies strive to provide the reader with enough contextual data so that the readers can probe the text for internal consistency and arrive at their own conclusions. That is, one goal of the work is to enable the reader to step into the place of the writer and know the institution so well that the reader may interpret the data. Interpretive cultural analysis of organizations is ethnographic in nature and neither prejudges particular variables such as rituals or myths, nor solves the problems for the organization.

Instead of a methodology that assumes cultural variables can be manipulated, the approach is more holographic. Researchers pay attention not so much to the grand gestures and symbols of organizational life, but rather to the mundane affairs that mark everyday existence. The point is not that highly symbolic activities do not occur, but rather that such activities need a framework that makes organizational life explicit in order to comprehend organizational reality. Instead of assuming that an open door functions as a symbol for communication, for example, the interpretive researcher uncovers the context within which an open door operates.

Cultural Analysis and Organizational Administration

I have attempted to point out two divergent strands that currently exist with regard to cultural research in postsecondary organizations. It is perhaps the roots of our undertaking that has caused us our greatest confusion. By outlining the different assumptions, trends, and methods of organizational culture, the goals of each approach become apparent. Table 1 outlines the differences of each approach. Smircich notes, "Some researchers give high priority to the

principles of prediction, generalizability, causality, and control: while others are concerned by what appear to them to be more fundamental issues of meaning and the processes by which organizational life is possible" (1983,p. 354).

Table 1

Functional and Interpretive Theories of Organizational Culture

	Functional	Interpretive
Reality	"Real," knowable	Socially-constructed, abstract
Cognitive Processes	Equally understandable to all participants	Equifinal
Cultural Artifacts	Manifest across cultures	Inherent to specific culture
Culture's Composition	Equals the sum of the parts	More than the sum of the parts
Laws	Generalizeable, causal relationships exist	Impossible to generalize
Purpose	To improve organizational effectiveness	To understand the root metaphor of organizational life
Method	Interviews/case study	Participant observation/ethnography

Organizational behavior in general, and the functional school of organizational culture specifically, has been driven in large part by the desire to provide rules and guidelines for management. The functionalist intends to alter organizational life. The goal of research is to highlight principles and concerns of culture so that managers may become more skilled in manipulating cultural variables. In short, a manager's task is to control culture; a researcher's job is to figure out ways the manager can do so.

On the other hand, cultural anthropologists and the interpretive school have neither desire nor impetus to be applied problem solvers.

The interpretive perspective is more theoretical and less applied. The researcher does not begin research with the assumption that the research findings will provide rules for solving managerial dilemmas. The interpretive approach believes that managers influence organizational meaning and that an awareness of the enactment that occurs in an organization aids in effective management, yet interpretive researchers do not believe that causal rules exist. Indeed, Black and Stephens suggest, "organizational culture change may have to follow philosophies of change similar to judo or akido.... The underlying forces or momentums (the values and assumptions) are assessed and then strategies for change are designed that flow with, rather than fight against, those underlying forces" (1988,p. 33).

The researchers' choice of one or another theory will have important consequences for the questions raised, methods used, and ultimately, the goals of the undertaking. We are not yet at the point where one theory reigns supreme and a paradigmatic shift has occurred. Several fruitful avenues for research remain both for the functionalist and the interpretive researcher. However, we need greater precision as we undertake cultural studies about our underlying assumptions and goals. In part, this article has attempted to provide clarity for cultural researchers in higher education.

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